

HISTORY OF THE OLD TOWN DESCENDANTS GROUP

By Corey Braun – May 2010

In 1981 the Old Town San Diego State Historic Park had just completed a restoration of the Casa de Estudillo on the Plaza in the park. A ribbon cutting ceremony was planned for the grand opening of the new museum. Alexa Luberski, the State Park Historian at the time, got the idea that there must be descendants of the Estudillo family still living in the area that may like to take part in the event. With a few contacts of members of the Estudillo family to start with, some invitations were sent out and advertisements were made looking for more members of the family to attend the opening. The event was a great success and became a sort of impromptu family reunion for the Estudillo family.

Alexa then realized there must be descendants of other Old Town pioneer families who would also be interested in a reunion to meet long lost relatives and share some family stories about Old Town that the State Park could possibly use in their historic interpretations in the park. The Visitor Center in the park had gathered a few names and addresses of visitors who said they were descendants of some of the Old Town pioneers. Notices were sent out to all the contacts Alexa could collect and an advertisement was put in *The San Diego Union*. In June of 1982 the first Descendants' Day Reunion was held in the Casa de Machado-Silvas in Old Town San Diego State Historic Park.

Alexa organized the same event every year for the next couple of years. When it became evident that she would be moving up in the State Park organization and leaving the Old Town San Diego State Historic Park she decided it was time to pass the baton on to someone else to carry on her legacy of the Annual Descendants' Day. After asking for volunteers at one of the reunions a planning meeting was held with Alexa and about a half a dozen volunteers.

It was decided that the best way to proceed was to form an organization of descendants to continue the yearly planning of the Descendants' Day event. Three people came forward to form the nucleus of the new organization. They were Henry Israel, Elena Orozco and Corey Braun. To better fit with the organization of the State Park at the time, the new descendants' organization would become a sub-group of the umbrella volunteer organization, of B.O.O.T. (Boosters of Old Town). By-laws for the descendants were written and the official name became "The Descendants of Early San Diego Pioneers". Corey Braun acted as President with Elena Orozco as Vice President and Henry Israel as Treasurer.

This group put together the next couple of Descendants' Day events and it was during this time (c.1986-1988) that the Descendants became actively involved with Larry Riveroll in the efforts to save the tombstones that had been removed from Calvary Cemetery in Mission Hills by the City of San Diego and dumped in a ravine in Mt. Hope Cemetery. The tombstones ended up being buried except for a few "representative samples", but the efforts of the Descendants did result in an inventory of all the tombstones in the ravine that were still in a position to be read.

The role of President of the Descendants of Early San Diego Pioneers was taken over by Anita Cota in about 1988. She lead the event that year and then the reigns of the Descendants were taken by Georgia Callian and Marsha Snelling. Georgia and Marsha were the leaders of the Descendant's organization for the next 16 years.

The organization of the State Park volunteers has evolved over the years and the B.O.O.T. organization is now mainly a fund raising non-profit association. The Descendants organization's by-laws were dropped and the name of the group was shortened to simply 'The Descendants'. A representative of the Descendants is invited to sit as a member of the B.O.O.T. Board of Directors and that role has been filled periodically over the years by Georgia Callian, Marsha Snelling, Corey Braun and Elena Orozco.

In 2009, Victor Crosthwaite Contreras has taken the lead in planning the Descendant's event for 2010 and Abel Silvas has joined the organizing team.
